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Reconstructing How We Respond to Our Students' Writing: An Exploratory Study

By Bryan Bardine, Ph. D.

As teachers of writing, one of the most difficult, time consuming, and important jobs we have is responding to our students' papers. This task is particularly important if our class is structured to allow students to revise their work. For our students to revise effectively, they have to understand the comments we write on their papers. Several studies (Dohrer, 1991; Land & Evans, 1987; Lynch & Klemans, 1978; Straub, 1997) have stressed the importance of being specific when commenting on students' drafts. Without the necessary detail of response, students have a more difficult time revising, or in many cases, even understanding where to begin the revision process. Furthermore, other scholars (Auten, 1992; Dohrer, 1991; Fife & O'Neil, 2001; Kimmel, 1993; Land & Evans, 1987) have noted the importance for teachers to

be able to communicate with their students about response. By doing so, and by understanding their own response styles (Bardine, Bardine, & Deegan, 2000; Greenhalgh, 1992; Wall & Hull, 1989), teachers can more effectively lead their students toward successful revision.

This study sought to answer a number of questions. First, how do teachers respond to "successful" and "unsuccessful" writers? Also, how are these responses different? Furthermore, how did the distribution of the types of comments the teachers used affect student understanding of the comments? For instance, were certain types of comments understood more often than others, and what might be the results of such occurrences for student



writers? Another objective of this research was to see how well the participating students understood the comments written on their essays, and to determine if there was any difference between how the “successful” and “unsuccessful” students understood their teachers’ commentary.

Both teacher participants in the study came highly recommended. Mr. Miller, from Leicester High School, was in his tenth year teaching at the time of the study. He had a Master of Arts in Teaching degree, and he was also a published poet. He had recently made significant changes to his teaching approach following his completion of a National Writing Project (NWP)—sponsored Summer Institute. Leicester’s daily format was quite different from the second school in the study—Westham. Leicester used a 4 x 4 block schedule, which meant that students took four classes a semester, each for four days a week for 80 minutes a day. Essentially, students in Mr. Miller’s class completed their entire English requirement for the year in one semester. During a typical semester in his class, Mr. Miller’s students would complete approximately 20 pieces of writing for their portfolios.

Ms. Nolan, from Westham, was in her fifth year of teaching at the time of the study. She was in many ways bound by Westham’s more traditional literature curriculum. Westham’s curriculum imposed a chronological approach to the course, meaning that her students began reading literature from the 18th century and gradually moved through the 20th century as the semester progressed. Also, Ms. Nolan’s class met for only one semester, and each class lasted 50 minutes. She was not with her students as long as Mr. Miller was, and in some respects this may have limited how she could approach instruction. During the semester in which the study took place, Ms. Nolan’s students completed five essays. Ms. Nolan had also recently completed the NWP Summer Institute within the year prior to the study. As both teachers had completed these summer institutes, had strong fundamental bases in writing instruction, and possessed a strong knowledge of current research and best practice, I felt confident that they were effective writing teachers.

Study Design

After speaking to Mr. Miller, Ms. Nolan, and their school administrators to get permission to conduct the study, I spoke to the students and asked for volunteer participants. After receiving the consent forms from the participating students, I spoke to both teachers and we discussed the students. Of the original 21 students, I narrowed the focus to 12 (7 from Leicester and 5 from Westham) because these students seemed to most closely fit my criteria: students with a range of abilities who would be willing to talk honestly and forthrightly about themselves during interviews.

During the study, I collected all of the students’ essays that contained written comments. For each comment written on the marked essay, students responded to two questions: what does the comment mean, and will the comment be helpful for future drafts? I also interviewed the students three times during the semester.

After analyzing the data, I further narrowed the research focus to two students from each school—one “successful” and one “unsuccessful” writer. I selected these students on the basis of consultations with the teachers, the students’ grades on their essays, how well they understood the comments written on their papers, and our discussions during interviews. At Leicester, the successful writer was Brad and the unsuccessful writer was James. At Westham, the successful writer was Mary and the unsuccessful writer was Rick (student names are pseudonyms). This article concerns only these four students.

Once the four students were selected, I began to examine in more detail the types of commentary they received on their writing and how well they understood particular kinds of response. It was also important to study the kinds of comments that the participating teachers placed on their students’ papers. In particular, I was interested to note if the teachers emphasized different types of comments for the successful and the unsuccessful writers. Before analyzing these findings, it is important to understand the types of comments that the teachers used.

I have previously conducted research examining the types of comments that teachers wrote on their students' essays (Bardine, 1999; Bardine et al., 2000), and for this study I employed the same categories of comments that I had found in the earlier research. These categories are praise, question, answer, attention, suggestion, and direction. Table 1 defines and gives examples of each of the six categories of responses the teachers used.

Table 1: Types of Responses Teachers Used*

Type of Comment	Explanation of Comment
Attention	Most often these responses are symbols used to call attention to a mistake, problem, or improvement in the students' writing. For example, when a teacher circles a word but gives no indication or direction as to what the symbol means, the assumption is that the student knows the meaning of the symbol.
Answer	These comments are typically pointed out by the teacher using symbols (underlines, cross-outs, x's, circles, etc.) and then writing in a correction near the symbol as an explanation. For instance, a teacher may see a misspelled word and circle it, writing the correct spelling above it.
Praise	These comments let students know they have done something well. Comments such as "well-written paragraph" or "strong thesis statement" are examples.
Question	These comments simply ask writers a question about their writing. For example, comments like "are you sure?" or "can you elaborate more here?"
Suggestion	These responses tell students what they are doing wrong or attempt to inform them how to improve on something without giving them the answer. For instance, responses like "please explain this point in more detail" or "you may want to focus more on your first supporting detail than on the second."
Direction	Though similar to suggestion responses, direction comments differ in one primary way—their tone. A direction response is an order to do something. For instance, "reword this sentence" or "give more support for this assertion."

*developed and modified from Bardine 1999, and Bardine et al. 2000.

How Did Teachers Respond to Their Students?

Mr. Miller and Ms. Nolan responded to their students' writing, in many ways, very similarly. Three papers from each of the four students were used in the study. Tables 2 and 3 show a numerical breakdown of how often each teacher used a particular type of comment when responding in writing to his or her students' papers. They also delineate the number of each type of comment

each student received, as well as how often the students understood the particular types of comments.

Table 2: Comment Type (by Number and Percent) for Mr. Miller and His Students

Comment Type	Mr. Miller Used	Brad Received	Brad Understood	James Received	James Understood
Attention	27 26%	15	12 80%	12	2 17%
Answer	30 29%	12	10 83%	18	9 50%
Praise	22 21%	16	15 94%	6	5 83%
Direction	13 15%	4	4 100%	9	9 100%
Question	8 8%	4	4 100%	4	2 50%
Suggestion	2 1%	1	1 100%	1	1 100%
Totals	102 100%	52	46 89%	50	28 56%

Table 3: Comment Type (by Number and Percent) for Ms. Nolan and Her Students

Comment Type	Ms. Nolan Used	Mary Received	Mary Understood	Rick Received	Rick Understood
Attention	58.5 37%	31	25 81%	27.5	18 67%
Answer	46 30%	24	23 96%	22	17 77%
Praise	22.5 14%	14.5	14.5 100%	8	8 100%
Direction	14.5 9%	4.5	4.5 100%	10	8 80%
Question	15 10%	4	4 100%	11	6.5 57%
Suggestion	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	156.5 100%	78	71 91%	78.5	57.5 73%

Attention Comments

Examining Tables 2 and 3 provides some insights into the ways that Mr. Miller and Ms. Nolan approached response to student writing. During interviews neither teacher mentioned the importance of using attention responses very often. However, both teachers used the attention comments quite frequently in their

written responses. In fact, more than one-quarter of Mr. Miller's and one-third of Ms. Nolan's comments were attention responses. The main problem with using attention responses is that students have a difficult time understanding their meaning—even the successful writers found them to be the most difficult type of comment to understand. Mr. Miller's successful writer, Brad, understood 80% (12 out of 15) of the attention responses on his writing. In contrast, the unsuccessful writer, James, only understood 17% (2 out of 12) of the attention comments on his papers. For example, on James' sample essay (see sidebar #1), Mr. Miller used five attention comments, and James understood just one of them. Comment number nine, which reads "present tense," is meant to show James that the word "understand" is in the present tense when it should be in the past tense, like the rest of the paragraph. On his questionnaire James wrote "it was in past tense" in response to the question "What does the comment mean?", showing he misunderstood Mr. Miller's intention. The problem, though, lies with the comment itself. It needs to be much more specific. Just explaining to James that "understand" is in the present tense gives him little direction in how to proceed. It is important for teachers to be as specific as possible with their comments so that their students will have a better opportunity to use the comments to help with revision and editing.

Sidebar #1: James/Answer Comment

Sentence: "As my mother sat there with crimson eyes and a tear streamed face, I understand the magnitude of this situation at hand, in my mother's husband my father dangerously close to death."

Questionnaire: What does the comment mean?
"It was in past tense"

How would it be helpful for future drafts?
"to place the words in present tense"

Similarly, Ms. Nolan used attention responses consistently throughout her commentary. In fact, she used them much more

often than did Mr. Miller. Her students fared slightly better than Mr. Miller's as far as their understanding of the comments. Rick, Ms. Nolan's unsuccessful writer, understood 67% of the attention comments, and Mary understood 81% of them. The two teachers, then, used attention commentary 85 times, and their students understood the meaning of these comments just 57 times, or 67% of the time. What is most important to note here is that the 28 comments that the students did not understand are 28 lost opportunities for revision. By their very nature, attention comments are vague.

Even if students understood the comments, they often did not know how they would be helpful for revision. In most cases, based on my research, teachers use symbols, abbreviations, or very brief 2-3 word fragments, which are often unclear. For instance, on Rick's sample essay (see sidebar #2), Ms. Nolan, on comment 10, writes the abbreviation "frag" above the line "Although this dream sounds exciting and pressure free." In his response to the question "What does the comment mean?", Rick correctly writes that he has a fragment, but on the second part of the questionnaire, he responds that it will not be helpful for his next draft. Even though he knows what the comment means, Rick cannot use that information to help with revision. Just calling attention to the problem is not enough for Rick. Ms. Nolan needs to provide more information for him to learn from the comment.

Sidebar #2: Rick—Sample Essay

Line: "Although this dream sound exciting an pressure free."

Questionnaire: What does the comment mean?
"I have a frag"

How would it be helpful for future drafts?
"it won't be"

In many cases, the teachers do review their response symbols and abbreviations with students, as both teachers in this study did, but too often they are not reviewed frequently enough throughout

the school year. Students may not be given enough time to look at the commentary in class and ask questions (or if they are given time, they may not use it effectively). Also, teachers may use the same symbols and abbreviations interchangeably to mean different things in different situations. For instance, Ms. Nolan, on Rick's sample essay, used a circle to refer to spelling errors, punctuation problems, and word choice issues. Because of Rick's difficulty in understanding attention comments, this type of overlap must be avoided.

Answer Comments

Only Mr. Miller mentioned answer commentary during our interviews, and he did not believe they were very effective. He said,

I'm not sure they ever stick, ...the only evidence I have of affecting anyone's grammar always happened face to face ...it's kind of sad because I do spend a lot of time writing out...“You have to say three choices here, put a dot over the comma—that makes a semi-colon.”

Despite his belief that this type of response did not work very well, he still used it nearly 30% of the time on Brad's and James's papers. Brad, just as with attention commentary, understood 80% of these answer responses. While James did not have as much difficulty understanding answer comments as he did attention commentary, he still only understood half (9 out of 18) of those written on his papers. For example (see sidebar #3), in his sample essay, James wrote the sentence “My hero's life now depended on the skills of a person he never became acquainted with.” Mr. Miller wrote the word “knew” (comment #13) above the phrase “became acquainted with” to show James a more concise way to end the sentence. On his questionnaire, James wrote that the comment meant he “misspelled a word in sentence.” James obviously did not understand the reason for Mr. Miller's response. While the comment may have seemed straightforward to Mr. Miller, James needed more information in order to interpret it correctly.

Sidebar #3: James—Sample Essay

Sentence: “A proud police officer, husband, father, for sixteen years. My hero's life now depended on the skills of a person he never became acquainted with.”

Questionnaire: What does the comment mean?
“misspelled a word in sentence”

Ms. Nolan never mentioned answer commentary in her interviews, and like Mr. Miller, she used it quite often—30% of the time. One interesting comparison between the teachers was that Ms. Nolan used answer commentary much more with her successful writer, whereas Mr. Miller used it more often with his unsuccessful writer. Sound reasons exist for both choices. Mr. Miller may have chosen to use answer comments so often with James



because he wanted James to understand what he (Mr. Miller) meant with the comments. On the other hand, Ms. Nolan seemed to be writing so many answer comments (she averaged 10 a paper) on Mary's papers because Mary's primary weakness was with grammar and punctuation. The assumption was that by correcting the grammar and punctuation, Ms. Nolan would be helping Mary learn how to use the different punctuation marks, especially commas, correctly. Despite Ms. Nolan's best efforts, though, Mary did not improve her use of punctuation during the time of the study. In fact, she made more grammar and punctuation errors at the end of the semester than she had at the beginning of the term. Although answer commentary did not help in Mary's understanding of commas, there may have been other factors as well. Mary's grades were very high throughout the time of the study, and she did virtually no revision or editing. Once she received her marked papers, she looked at the grade and if she was satisfied she put the paper away.

On the surface, answer commentary seems easy to understand—the teacher is correcting students' errors for them. Unfortunately, for some students, particularly the unsuccessful writers, understanding answer comments is not as easy as it might appear. One reason answer comments were so difficult was because often there were so many written on the students' papers. Both teachers wrote large numbers of comments on their students' essays, and one major issue was that the students had a difficult time determining which comments were supposed to be serving what purpose. For instance, on James's sample essay (see sidebar #4), Mr. Miller wrote 7 comments (6 of them were answer responses) in one sentence. The sentence read, "I went over to my father's bed took his hand into mine and I heard the sound of the heart monitor my father said everything will be alright." Seven comments written on such a short sentence can be confusing for any writer, but it can be especially confusing for a struggling writer like James who misunderstood five of the seven comments. Both teachers needed to consider how well their writers, particularly their weaker writers like James and Rick, understood the comments written on their papers. Like the attention comments, answer responses may seem

to the teacher easy to understand, but teachers need to consider the individual student when responding on their papers.

Sidebar #4: James—Sample Essay

Sentence: "I went over to my father's bed took his hand into mine and I heard the sound of the heart monitor. my father said everything will be alright."

Annotations: (23) An, (19) M An, (20) An, (22) An, (24) An, (21) An, (18) quotes At

At=Attention comments
An=Answer comments

Praise Comments

Based on the relatively small amount of praise the teachers wrote on their students' papers, it seems as though offering positive responses was not that important to these instructors. However, past researchers (Daiker, 1989; Dragga, 1986; Harris, 1977) have found that both high school and college teachers respond positively far less often than did either Mr. Miller or Ms. Nolan. Based on these numbers and percentages, plus their comments during interviews, both teachers felt that praising their writers was an important goal in the response process. Mr. Miller commented about responding positively when he said, "I ... like it (responding), like a sports fan, like cheer them on maybe." He has put himself into another role—a cheerleader for his students' writing. Throughout the study this cheerleader role was evident. For instance, on Brad's first essay, titled "Boot Camp," Mr. Miller commented, "I love how you drop us right into the action." On Brad's second essay, titled "The White Beretta," Mr. Miller wrote "great last line!!" On the questionnaire, Brad responded that the comment meant "Good closing line, proves a point," which it did. On these and other instances throughout Brad's papers, Mr. Miller seemed genuinely excited about Brad's writing, and his comments were positive and supportive.

However, the same was not true for James' work. This is not to say that Mr. Miller did not give positive responses to James'

writing—he did, but the same level of enthusiasm was not there. For instance, on James's first essay, titled "The Draft Notice," Mr. Miller wrote "good" next to the line "It seemed ominous for such a disheartened day." On his questionnaire James responded that the comment meant that he had done something well, but that it would not be helpful for future drafts "because it was good." James did not see how a positive comment could be helpful for his future writing—in part because the general comment "good" did not tell him what worked well. Based on James's ability to understand Mr. Miller's commentary, it seems clear that he would require more specific information in his written responses.

Ms. Nolan felt similarly to Mr. Miller concerning positive response. She commented,

I try to be foremost positive. ...I would never turn any paper back without something positive written on it...I always try and pull out what I think is positive and work from that even if it's one small part.

Ms. Nolan believed that positive response is important, and she praised her students more often than what most researchers found, although not as often as Mr. Miller. Although the difference between the positive responses Mr. Miller gave to Brad and James was clear, the difference was not so pronounced in Ms. Nolan's positive commentary to Mary and Rick. She did respond positively twice as often to Mary as to Rick, although the tone in her positive responses was more consistent to both writers. She used exclamation points with her commentary to both writers, unlike Mr. Miller. Like Mr. Miller, though, when she showed enthusiasm in her responses, they were too general. In Rick's sample essay (see sidebar #5), Ms. Nolan responded with the word "yes!" to this sentence, "Oh no, because I know this is my American Dream and I can write it and live it the way I want." On his questionnaire, Rick wrote "I did something good" to the question "what does the comment mean?" Clearly, though, he does not know what he did well or how it can be used to guide future drafts—if at all. Both teachers recognized the importance of praising their student writers; however, often the students were unable

to understand what they had done well or how a positive response could be useful for future drafts or subsequent essays.

Sidebar #5: Rick—Sample Essay

(14) — Yes!

Sentence: "Oh no, because I know this is my American Dream and I can write it and live it the way I want."

Questionnaire: What does the comment mean?

"I did something good"

Question Comments

Although both teachers liked question responses, they posed problems for the students, particularly the unsuccessful writers. One example of this discrepancy between believing question comments were a good response tool but rarely using them on students' essays occurred when Mr. Miller commented about the importance of using questions to help students begin to ask themselves about their own writing. During an interview, I asked Mr. Miller which kind of written responses helped his students the most. He said that question comments are always the best because students come up to him to answer the questions he proposed. On another occasion he commented that he always tries to come up with a question about the topic itself, more of a personal question, not necessarily a literary one or a writing question. He tries to ask something like "Why do you think your mother said that?" Mr. Miller thinks this shows interest in a student's writing, that he is taking the paper seriously.

Mr. Miller believes in using questions to help students revise; however, when he actually responded to his students' writing, he rarely asked them. In fact, other than the suggestion remarks, the question comments were used the least (only 8% of the time). He only asked his two writers eight questions on their essays. As with attention and answer comments, James had much more difficulty understanding the question responses. In fact, he understood only two of the four questions that were posed on his papers. As with the previous categories, Brad had a much better understanding of

the comments Mr. Miller was writing. He understood each of the four questions on his writing.

Like Mr. Miller, Ms. Nolan discussed the strengths of using questions on her students' writing. During an interview, she talked about her intention to use questions rather than statements to give students more options for their essays. Further, she noted that she primarily avoided questions when her comments dealt with the mechanical concerns of her students' writing. Ms. Nolan believed that she uses questions quite often in her commentary. On the contrary, fewer than 10% of her comments were questions, and she used questions much more often with Rick, the unsuccessful writer, than with Mary, who understood all of the questions written on her essays. Rick understood just four of eleven question comments on his writing; it was the type of commentary he understood the least. In most cases, Ms. Nolan used question responses to indicate confusion or to ask for clarification. For instance (see sidebar #6), Rick wrote the sentence "The thought of ridding (sic) around with the Merchant Marines was

once a power forcing driving to keep me sane and even alive."

Ms. Nolan circled the words "forcing driving" and wrote a question mark above them. On his questionnaire Rick wrote "she is just confused I don't know," in response to "What does the comment mean?" In this case, Rick failed to address the question, but rather turned his response back on Ms. Nolan. If he thinks that she is confused, he also thinks he does not need to address this issue with his own writing. Clearly, Ms. Nolan needed to understand more about how well Rick interpreted her comments so that she could more effectively respond to his writing. It would have been more helpful for Rick if the comment was more specific, such as "Can you be more specific?" or "I don't follow this phrase; can you reword?" Had Ms. Nolan known that Rick had such difficulty with question responses, she could have been more specific in the questions she asked.

Sidebar #6: Rick—"Tom's Farewell" Essay

Sentence: "The thought of ridding (sic) around with the Merchant Marines was once a power forcing driving to keep me sane and even alive."

What does the comment mean?

"She is just confused I don't know"

Both teachers felt that using questions as response tools was a good practice, although neither used them very often or to good use, particularly with their weaker writers. A discrepancy existed between the ability of the weaker writers and the stronger writers to understand the commentary on their papers. It is important for teachers to be able to respond differently to different students—to know what kinds of comments they will understand and what types will give them more problems.

Direction and Suggestion Comments

The final two types of comments, direction and suggestion, were not as significant in this study because they were infrequently used (once per teacher for suggestion responses and 11% of the time for direction commentary). One interesting observation



about the direction commentary was that all four students understood at least 72% of those comments. The primary reason for this was that in direction comments the teacher tells the student what to do. For instance, on James's second essay, Mr. Miller directs him to "read your work aloud to yourself to check for errors." Mr. Miller tells him exactly what he should do—it's easier to understand.

Both teachers seemed to understand that their weaker writers needed more direction. They used direction comments at least twice as often with weaker writers as with their stronger writers. However, because so few direction comments were used, it is difficult to measure their effect on students' revisions.

Implications for Teaching

Several important implications arose from this study. First, teachers should learn their own response tendencies. Teachers need to understand the types of comments they typically write on their students' papers. By using a questionnaire like the one in this study, teachers can identify the types of comments students have the most difficulty understanding. After marking an essay, teachers might have students complete questionnaires and attach them to the marked papers. Teachers can then go through the questionnaires and see how often students understood the comments written on their papers. Also, as they review the questionnaires, they can examine them to see which types of responses troubled students the most. By understanding these two aspects of response, teachers can comment on their students' writing more effectively.

Furthermore, teachers can then share this information with their students to help them see the types of comments they had trouble understanding and to explain the meaning behind those same comments. Teachers need to understand how well their students interpret the comments on their papers. Each time a student misunderstands a comment, another opportunity for revision and learning is lost. Failure to understand a comment or to write a comment that is easily understood hurts students' ability to improve their writing.

Mary, Ms. Nolan's successful writer, is a good example of why it is important for teachers to understand how they respond to their writers. Mary struggled throughout the study with comma usage, and in fact, she made more comma mistakes at the end of the study than at the beginning of the term. One reason for Mary's continued difficulty with commas may have been because she would spend little or no time reviewing her papers when they were returned, unlike the other three students in the study. In most cases, because her grades were so high (each of her papers in the study received a 94%), she did not revise her work. Students were allowed to revise their papers, but Mary chose not to. Another possible reason for her lack of improvement with commas could be that whenever Ms. Nolan responded to Mary's comma errors, she used answer comments. While this may not be the only reason Mary did not reduce her comma errors, it may certainly be a contributing factor. Answer responses do the work for the student. The student does not learn anything from the comments themselves—he or she just fixes the mistake according to what the teacher wrote next to the error.

A second implication is that teachers must write comments that their students will understand. Responding to student writing is difficult because too often teachers assume their students will understand all the comments written on their papers. In an interview, Mr. Miller was asked, "How well do you think the students in the study understand the responses you make on their writing? And how do you know this?" He replied that he really did not know, that he was not sure how his students perceived his comments. Even though he spent class time reviewing student essays on the overhead and discussing their strengths and weaknesses, he still didn't know if his students understood his commentary.

Teachers must do everything they can to help students understand the comments written on their papers. Specific comments will help, which means avoiding vague responses like attention commentary. Furthermore, teachers need to be careful not to assume their students understand certain kinds of comments. For instance, a teacher might assume that students know that a circled

word means that the word is misspelled. If, however, the students do not realize that, then the teacher needs to spend class time going over the kinds of comments s/he typically writes on papers.

Third, teachers need to be more consistent in how they praise their writers. Both teachers praised their writers more often than previous research suggests, although the successful writers received more than twice the praise comments than the unsuccessful writers. Teachers should not hesitate to comment on the positive aspects of an essay, no matter how slight, unless a student might consider the praise excessive. Most students find even the simplest praise gratifying, and they will often see it as a confidence boost. Sometimes teachers may hold back praise for one student when for another student the same comment would be thought of as gratuitous.

Fourth, whenever possible teachers and students should try to meet one-on-one to talk about writing. Writing comments on students' papers can be an effective response tool, but as this study shows, students may not properly interpret a significant number of the responses written on their papers. Clearly, not all teachers have the time to conference with every student, but if this study shows anything, it is that unsuccessful writers especially need the extra time that individual conferences can provide. Mr. Miller was able to conference more with his students than Ms. Nolan; however, the conferences dealt with drafts prior to his responding to them. In essence, then, the conferences did not focus on comments that the students misunderstood, but rather questions

that they had concerning the papers. Conferencing is one more way to give students the opportunity to discuss any questions they have about the responses on their papers. With little in-class time to talk to students individually, teachers may want to keep conferences to just one topic or keep conferences very brief—just a few minutes, as Murray (1982) suggests. Working with a few students each day in class or setting up office hour conferences can go a long way to helping students understand teachers' commentary.

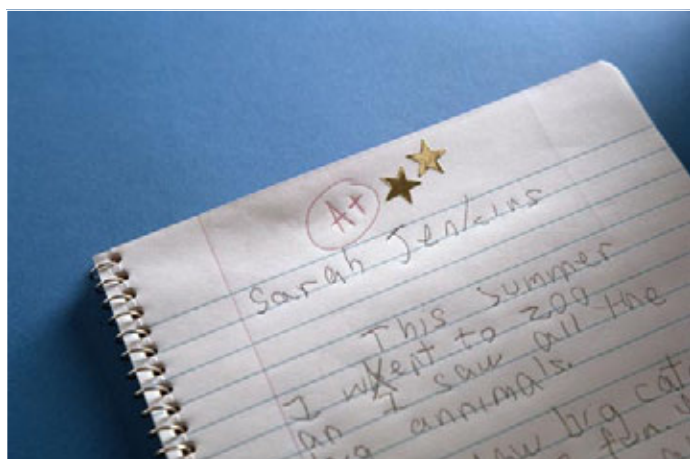
A final implication of this study is that teachers need to avoid using answer and attention comments when responding to their students' essays. Answer and attention comments point to problem areas in student writing, but neither type of response gives students the tools necessary to find the mistakes on their own in the future. In essence, these comments serve as band-aids for the real issue that students need to learn—how to recognize their own problems with their writing and also be able to correct them.

Answer and attention comments fail to do that. When students do not understand written comments, an opportunity for revision and/or editing is lost.

Conclusion

The purposes of this study were to learn how teachers responded to "successful" and "unsuccessful" writers and to see if the teachers responded differently to each type of student. In most cases, there was a difference—unsuccessful writers received less praise; they understood the commentary on their papers less often, particularly with attention, answer, and question comments; and they were given more direction responses. Successful writers understood their comments more often, even though, like the unsuccessful writers, they had the most difficulty understanding the answer and attention responses. Successful writers received more question responses and understood a much greater percentage of them than did unsuccessful writers.

As teachers respond to their students' writing, they need to remember several things. All students are not alike; they all need to



be responded to on an individual basis using specific comments. Teachers need to avoid, if at all possible, using answer and attention responses. Also, all students should receive genuine praise so they know that the teacher is looking for the good parts of the paper as well as the weaker parts.

Written commentary can be very helpful, but many students may not understand the comments being written on their papers. It is important to allow students time, either in class or during office hours, to talk about the comments they see on their writing.

Finally, teachers need to examine their response patterns often, and they need to determine how well their students understand the comments on their papers. By not doing this, teachers risk depriving their students of a valuable opportunity—the ability to revise effectively.

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